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ABSTRACT

The causes and types of student underachievement and suggestions for remedying the problem are discussed. Because the reasons for underachievement are numerous, different for individuals, and often overlapping, solutions must consider the unique context. Recommendations include increasing students' self-esteem; increasing community involvement; offering counseling, referral services, and study skills tutoring; and encouraging student interests. (LMI)

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Underachievement: The Bart Simpson Syndrome

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RUNNING HEAD: Bart Simpson

EA 022 243

Abstract

Underachievement is of concern to teachers, parents, and counselors in today's educational system. This paper explores the causes of underachievement, describes the various types of underachievement and offers suggestions to assist with this problem.

America has a new hero. The cartoon character, Bart Simpson of the Simpson Family is an "underachiever"--"and proud of it-man!". There are buttons and tee-shirts which loudly proclaim his pride in his underachievement. His television cartoon show is watched by literally millions of children who are very subtly influenced by his message. If they were lacking in motivation prior to his show, they will certainly remain lethargic now.

The problem of underachievement is, in all reality, not a humorous one. We have all heard of complaints from teachers who recognize a child with potential who does not apparently care about his or her academics. Parents are often frustrated by low grades on report cards when they seem to intuitively know that their children are capable of better work. The offices of guidance counselors and school psychologists are filled with cases of children with above average I.Q. scores, who are simply just doing mediocre work--or simply enough just to get by.

What causes underachievement or lack of motivation? What are the reasons that highly intelligent people simply do not live up to their potential? This paper will examine some of the causes of underachievement and suggest strategies for dealing with the problem area. Motivation will be discussed, although it is by no means the main problem area. There are a great many other areas that are relevant to this difficulty but which are simply not discussed or examined. Teachers, parents and counselors

need to know the reasons for underachievement and understand these reasons to be able to deal with this very serious dilemma in American schools today.

What exactly is "underachievement"? Basically, a teachers, parent or counselor forms an opinion regarding a child's intelligence and then cursorily compares their informal assessment of the child's I.Q. with their academic grades, achievement scores or report card grades. The parent/teacher/counselor simply feels that the child could "do better." They may have done better in the past, or the parent or teacher simply feels that they are not working hard enough.

There are also psychometric or statistical ways to determine "underachievement." A certified school psychologist may give an I.Q. test and an achievement test and discern if there is a discrepancy between expected achievement and actual achievement, based on the results of the I.Q. test. Nowadays, many group standardized tests have this feature "built into" the tests. All statistical manipulations are done internally and the computer print out alerts parents and teachers as to the fact that Joe or Jane are not working up to potential.

Some students seem to be underachievers in specific academic areas. Joe has never liked spelling, he always seems to do poorly in spelling, his essays reflect poor spelling content, and he may in fact have a learning disability in the field of spelling. Jane on the other

hand, has always had trouble in math. She works hard, does her homework, and has even been tutored by a local college student. She still does not like math and does poorly in math. Her grades in her other areas are good--she is a straight "A" student. There are differences between these two students however, who are both underachievers. Jane puts forth a great deal of effort. She tries to do better in math and works at her homework diligently. Joe on the other hand, is careless and sloppy. He rushes through his homework, never uses a dictionary, rarely proof reads his work, and would prefer to play baseball instead of reviewing his spelling.

While both of these students could be considered underachievers, there are specific reasons for their underachieving and different things must be done to help these two students. Jane is probably doing the best she can given her limitations. Teacher expectations should be modified for her. On the other hand, Joe is simply lazy and doesn't care much about his spelling or the appearances of his papers.

A third type of student does not do well "across the board." He or she is of above average intelligence, but their grades are simply mediocre. They do not get much gratification from school. They do not enjoy school. They are periodically absent and are simply not motivated. They have no goals in life and no outlet for their skills, talents and abilities. Some of these students however, have

hobbies at home such as rock or stamp collecting and have their own interests--chameleons, castles, outer space and the like. They go to the library and read books on these topics, but the normal classroom environment "turns them off."

Robert Sternberg of Yale University has extensively studied people who do not do well in school or in life. There are a great many people who have an above average intellect, but fail to achieve success. Sternberg lists twenty reasons why intelligent people do not do well. They are:

1. Lack of motivation
2. Lack of impulse control
3. Lack of perseverance and preservation
4. Using the wrong abilities
5. Inability to translate thought into action
6. Lack of product orientation
7. Inability to complete tasks and follow through
8. Failure to initiate
9. Fear of failure
10. Procrastination using the wrong abilities
11. Misattribution of blame
12. Excessive self pity
13. Excessive dependency
14. Wallowing in personal difficulties
15. Distractibility and lack of concentration
16. Spreading oneself too thin or too thick
17. Inability to delay gratification
18. Inability or unwillingness to see the forest from the trees
19. Lack of balance between critical analytic thinking and creative synthetic thinking
20. Too little or too much self confidence (pp. 339-345)

I have found that there are a few other important reasons why bright students do not do well. These are:

1. Excessive escapism--watching inordinate amounts of television, going to movies (almost daily) and watching V.C.R. and M.T.V. items excessively.

2. Poor interpersonal skills--many students do not relate real well to their teachers--they are insolent, negativistic, defiant, hostile and disrespectful. We live in a social world and students must learn somewhere along the line that interaction is important. Dale Carnegie has much to teach our present generation.
3. Wrong values--many students are so hung up on getting a car that they neglect their studies and end up "underachieving." To them, the car is the most important thing in the entire world, and they sacrifice their grades and future for that beat up Volkswagon.
4. Experimentation or use of alcohol and/or drugs. This domain must be cautiously examined.
5. Sexual promiscuity or "acting out." Many students underachieve simply because they are infatuated and sexually involved with peers.

While there may be some overlap to some of these reasons, there ar also a number of other reasons for underachievement. Other students simply have no outlet for their skills, talents and abilities. Some students simply float through school until a very bright perceptive teacher encourages a student to join the school newspaper or the student government. Other students are lost until they join the band and choir and realize their musical potential. For some students, the damage has already been done and they are so turned off to school that the only option for them is to "drop out." Parents, teachers and counselors must be able to find academic alternatives to dropping out. Many colleges allow high school students to take college courses. Some universities offer a high school diploma via independent study. Work-study programs may be more appropriate for certain students. After cleaning garbage cans for a few weeks or months many students begin to see the value in school and

education. A part time volunteer role in a hospital or nursing home may alert some students to the realities of life facing them out there.

The Emotionally Disturbed Underachiever

There are some students who are underachievers by dint of the fact that they have psychological problems and they simply cannot function in a regular school setting. Some can be maintained in special education classes, but others require residential treatment, and/or psychotropic medication. Teachers should not feel that they have failed, but that rather the pathology is so severe, that they simply cannot cope with this particular child. Teachers by virtue of their contact with kids are privy to the reasons for their depression, anger and hostility.

What to do with kids who don't know what to do with what they got

There are a great many students who are bright, but do not realize that they have a gift. They learn rapidly yet are far away from college. These kids need to:

1. Know that they are effective, efficient learners
2. Be told that they are good students with potential
3. Be prompted to explore various vocational possibilities in their community
4. Seek out avenues of interest in the community
5. Really be helped to explore the world out there and the opportunities available to them

6. Be aware of the various agencies that may be interested in him or her (i.e., the military, local colleges, services organizations)
7. Perhaps be seen with their parents or guardians regarding the teacher's perceptions
8. Be given help in study skills, note-taking underlining, test taking, time management, prioritizing and reading.
9. Be given some interest inventories to help students understand where they may be heading.
10. Be helped to see the relationship between present learning and future earning.
11. Be counseled regarding any self-defeating behavior ex. not turning in homework, cutting class, excessive absences.
12. Be matched with a mentor if at all possible.
13. Be given attention, responsibilities, duties both in school and outside school.
14. Investigate his interest, likes/dislikes for clues to understand him or her.
15. Take a learning style inventory as this may give a teacher some insight - especially if the teacher's teaching style, and the learner's learning style is not congruent.
16. In extreme cases changing schools may be in order. A fresh start at another school may ameliorate the situation.
17. Take a full psychological evaluation to help both

parents and teachers (and child - if he/she is mature enough) to see "the total picture."

18. Get help from a tutor, counselor, coach, or trusted significant other.

The Invisible Underachievers

We must not neglect those students who might dowell in a certain academic environment, but are either not given a chance or are simply ignored. Many talented girls do not take physics, chemistry, and even music. They are not encouraged to examine and explore these areas. Likewise, men are often not encouraged to enter nursing and similar positions. Although stereotypes and trends may be changing- they are changing slowly.

And many other students sit in schools underachieving because teachers simply have not enthusiastically instilled the love of learning the excitement of discovery, the thrill of literature and the fascination of science. We have computers in education but these machines cannot bring about a desire, a willingness indeed a drive to learn, to read and to consume knowledge voraciously as Jack London's hero Martin Eden did.

Sternberg, R.J. (1986) Intelligence applied: Understanding and increasing your intellectual skills. San Diego. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

Appendix 16

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